New Skills for Model Workers

The United Nations Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs (CSDHA) is the UN focal point for coordination of activities undertaken during the UN Decade of Disabled Persons. In addition, the Centre is responsible for UN activities related to crime prevention and criminal justice, social development and social welfare, youth, ageing and women. The Centre's Disabled Persons Unit monitors and evaluates the implementation of the World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons and provides assistance to Governments in preparing disability-related legislation.

The Unit also provides guidance on disability issues to Governments and non-governmental organizations; supports technical cooperation projects in the field of disability; prepares publications on disability issues; and promotes national, regional and international programmes and activities concerning disabled persons. CSDHA, in cooperation with other UN bodies, non-governmental organizations and Governments, is also developing long-term strategies for implementing the World Programme of Action. The following story describes one programme supported by CSDHA.

Model cars ... smiling faces ... friendly adult words of advice and encouragement. Wooden toys are scattered around the room in dismantled states which parents all over the world would recognize—a stray wheel here, an axle there. But the young people at Proyek Rehabilitasi Bethesda, a rehabilitation project for the disabled poor in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, are not playing with toys; they are producing them. They are not pulling them apart, but carefully and skilfully assembling them.

Sixteen-year-old Sahari, who has had one leg amputated, is boring holes for the wheels of a model car. His friend, Rubino, a boy who is spastic and has a paralysed right arm, turns out axles on a foot-operated lathe.

Young people in Indonesia have a hard time finding work, but disabled people have even greater difficulties. The Bethesda project tries to reduce those obstructions by teaching practical skills.

Bethesda was started four years ago to help disabled children from the poorest families, because it was clear that just a little professional help could make a world of difference. Corrective surgery could straighten out a crooked leg; an artificial limb would allow a child to walk on two feet; and sometimes all children wanted was the chance to go to school or attend a training programme to acquire some of the practical skills they needed to survive.

"This is not a home for disabled children," says Project Leader Colin McLennan. "It's a training centre to enrich the lives of those it serves."

The Centre works with people like 15-year-old Warid. The project's staff met him in one of the large markets in Jakarta, where he earned money as a shoeshine boy by day, and curled up in a corner to sleep at night. Warid, who had had one leg amputated, had little education. After six months at the training centre, during which time he attended a tailoring course, he returned home with a new artificial leg, a new skill—and a new sewing-machine on which to practise his craft.

Each of us needs support and advice from family and friends if we are to realize our full potential. Disabled people are no exception, but their families may need counselling if they are to offer the right kind of support.

Agung, for example, was six years old when he first came to the project. He had lost his right leg below the knee in a road accident and was reluctant to return to school because he was malu (an Indone-

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sian word which combines shyness, shame and disgrace). His parents loved him very much, but they also felt slightly ashamed of his disability. Although schoolboys his age wear short trousers, Agung's parents made him wear long trousers to hide the stump of his leg, and they carried him everywhere rather than letting him walk on crutches.

The advice from the project's staff was straightforward. Agung should go to school, use his crutches and wear short trousers like all the other small boys. It took courage, but Agung showed he had plenty. Now his parents are rightly proud of their son as he marches off with his books every day. And after school he plays a mean game of football with his friends.

It is estimated that there are about 4 million disabled people in Indonesia out of a population of approximately 179 million. Only 2 or 3 per cent of them can attend government or private rehabilitation centres. The problem, of course, is money. Even the small charge levied by some centres can put services out of the reach of the poorest families. So Proyek Rehabilitasi Bethesda is free. It will pay for any hospitalization and also provide any equipment required, such as artificial limbs.

Money for the project comes from a number of organizations, including the Voluntary Fund for the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons. The Fund, which was established to support innovative projects of this kind, is administered by the Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs. It offers "seed money" for schemes which demonstrate what disabled people can achieve as an important part of their own communities. The projects that the Fund supports must also be able to be integrated with other local services and be viable over the long term.

Proyek Rehabilitasi Bethesda succeeds because disabled people themselves have a strong voice in running it. Apart from Colin McLennan, a New Zealander, all the staff are Indonesian and most of them are disabled. This is for practical as well as philosophical reasons. Disabled people themselves are best qualified to give advice on how to use a wheelchair, for example in the rough terrain of an Indonesian village, and on how to cope with efforts to integrate themselves into daily life.

Bethesda's hive of activity is a building which has three classrooms as well as workshops and offices. It can also accommodate 10 staff members and up to 30 trainees who temporarily live there while taking their courses. These could be basic lessons in reading and writing, or remedial programmes for children whose parents might have kept them out of school. But children and young people also learn new skills at Bethesda. For example, one can hear the crackling of faulty radios being repaired in the electronics course, and the whir of sewing-machines as girls learn dressmaking skills.

A lot of the noise also comes from workshops assembling mechanical aids for disabled people. The project employs seven full-time workers (most of them disabled) who make orthotic devices like braces, which help straighten and support weakened limbs. They also make prostheses which help "complete" an arm or a leg. The materials may be leather and metal rather than the moulded fibreglass used in richer countries, but they work well in local conditions and are much more affordable.

Just as important as the availability of artificial aids is the skill to use them (not as simple as most able-bodied people think). Murtiani was seven years old when she first came to Bethesda. Poliomyelitis had left her with a paralysed left leg and, although she could walk with a limp, her foot had become badly twisted. Her father had obtained a brace for her but it remained unused because he was unsure of the proper way to fit it. So the project arranged for Murtiani to see a physiotherapist, who demonstrated that the little girl could walk better with crutches, and suggested exercises which have now strengthened her foot. All this was provided at very little cost.

The Bethesda project has helped many people to earn money at home. But it was clear that all the disabled dressmakers, mechanics and electronics engineers would always be competing with other citizens. They could certainly get some work, but it might not be regular enough to provide an adequate income.

One way to ensure a steadier income is to market the goods which disabled workers make. Handicrafts are an obvious possibility for sale to

tourists and for export. So Bethesda started with leatherwork: attractive batik designs are applied to white leather, which is then stitched and sewn together to make all sorts of goods, from wallets to sewing kits to satchels.

Tumira, whose leg was paralysed as a result of polio, was one of the first to be trained in leatherwork at the project. He is what they call a "producer". He is now busy at home making small cases and overnight bags, knowing he has a guaranteed outlet. The goods which Tumira makes are now sold all over the world.

This is where the wooden toys entered the picture. Bethesda found a good instructor who had been making toys for the local market. He also discovered a ready supply of raw material in the offcuts from a nearby furniture factory. And now an additional grant from the Voluntary Fund has enabled the programme to employ the instructor, a machine operator and an administrator, and to start working with eight trainees. The young people begin by living and working at the project. Then they go home to work, after being supplied with tools which are hand- or foot-operated, since few of their houses have electricity. The producers will return regularly to Bethesda to deliver their goods and pick up materials to meet fresh orders.

Toys for export have to be of high quality; the model cars and cranes and trucks need to look attractive and meet international safety standards. They also have to defy energetic five-year-olds all over the world who are determined to pull them apart. That's quite a task.

But after the difficulties the model workers of Yogyakarta have already overcome in their young lives, this is one challenge they should be able to take in their stride.

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